

PEACE—NOT WAR.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED IN THE

FEDERAL STREET MEETINGHOUSE,

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ISAIAH ii. 4.

AND THEY SHALL BEAT THEIR SWORDS INTO PLOUGH-SHARES, AND THEIR
SPEARS INTO PRUNING-HOOKS; NATION SHALL NOT LIFT UP SWORD
AGAINST NATION, NEITHER SHALL THEY LEARN WAR ANY MORE.

IN such language did the later Jewish Prophets describe an era, of which they were permitted to have an obscure foresight. At a distance of time they knew not how great, but probably mistook as being much nearer to their own age than it stood in the plan of the Divine Providence, they beheld One whose influence upon the nations would be like the rising of the sun upon a dark world. His form they but dimly descried, his office they imperfectly understood, and the fruits of his mission they inadequately expressed beneath the imagery for which they were indebted to their Oriental birth and Jewish education. Such a being as Jesus Christ actually was, never probably arose before the vision of any one of them; and such

a religion as he unfolded, was in many respects foreign alike from their associations and their hopes. But, now and then, the future seems to have opened before them wide enough to disclose the true character of its scenes. And as they gazed on the strange spectacle, they appear to have been impressed by nothing, more than by the contrast which it presented to the rude and warlike character of their own times. In “the last days” there should be peace upon the earth; violence and strife should cease; the angry passions, and the ambitious, jealous, selfish tempers, of men should be exchanged for justice and love. When he whose “girdle” should be “righteousness,” and whose name “the Prince of Peace,” should establish his reign, and the earth should be “full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea,” then should “they neither hurt nor destroy in all his holy mountain;” then should they “beat their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation should not lift up sword against nation, neither should they learn war any more.” Wonderful effect! to follow on the appearance of “the father” of the final age. A revolution to be wrought in the opinions and usages of mankind! A change, not only in their practices, but in their notions of what was right and honorable and necessary. Through all the past had rung the fierce cry of War; under the Messiah whom God should send to a weary world, as

well as to a broken and disconsolate people, the voice of Peace should fill the air with its soft melodies. What a contrast ! What a change !

More centuries than the Jewish Prophets calculated on had rolled away, and the Messiah “came to his own,” who “received him not ;” but “as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God” and the sons of peace. The period of which prophecy spoke in the passages which I have repeated, was, however, still far distant. Christianity, the religion of the Prince of Peace, was forced into alliance with the sword and the spear. Men went forth in the name of Jesus to glut their savage tempers on the battle-field, the demoniac spirit of Heathenism blew its trumpet-call in lands from which Christian faith had removed the temples of idolatry, and passions, the brood of hell, nestled and grew strong beneath the protection of the Church. Nearly thrice the number of centuries which intervened between the harp of Isaiah and the Gospel era have passed, and the world still waits for the fulfilment of the ancient prediction. The art of war, which men were to “learn no more,” is still practised and taught, nation “lifts up sword against nation” in menace, if not in combat, and still throughout the earth they are trained “to hurt and destroy one another.” Some improvement — thank God ! — we may observe. The last quarter of a century is memorable in the annals of Christendom for

the general peace which has prevailed. Europe has rested from the work of bloodshed. But it has rested on its arms. The sword has not been beaten into the plough-share, but ever and anon has been drawn from its scabbard that it might be brandished in the face of some Christian neighbor. In our own land we are not permitted to learn from history alone the mischiefs and horrors of which war is the occasion ; but, there is some reason to fear, may be forced to come into nearer relation to it. Not content with the experience which we have had of the blessings that flow from peace, many seem anxious to bring the country into a collision with the principal Power of the Old World. I allude to this now, only as an illustration of the partial control which Christianity has gained over the habits of modern civilization. The common question at this time, as men exchange the salutations of the day, is an inquiry respecting the probability of a war. The utter impropriety of such a question in a Christian land, does not strike us. And I want no stronger proof of the hold which unchristian ideas have got on our minds. Suppose the question to be asked in heaven, as angel should meet angel, — do you think we shall have a war ? Suppose it to be asked in a company of real Christians, to whom we ascribed “ the mind of Christ ; ” — should we not start at the manifest affront which such a question put on the characters of those concerning whom it was asked. What occasion

could there be for such an inquiry among them who had imbibed the spirit of Jesus, or the temper of heaven? Yet in a Christian land, a land covered with Christian churches, in the midst of a people glorying in the Christian name, the question is asked with an entire insensibility to the imputation which it conveys.

Does any one exclaim, in surprise or in mockery — what imputation? We will answer, whether it be scorn or ignorance that prompts the demand. The imputation of inconsistency; inconsistency between our profession and our practice — our name and our temper — our religion and our life. We worship God as disciples of his Son, yet talk, coolly or eagerly, as it may be, of the probabilities of deadly strife with those whom this Divine Being has taught us to embrace within our fraternal sympathies. We call ourselves Christians, and prove ourselves Pagans. We profess to keep the law of love, while we provide for the gratification and nourishment of ill will, hate and cruelty.

How comes it, that there is so little sense among us of this gross inconsistency? How comes it, that Christian men are so recreant to their duty, and their privilege, as believers in him who came to plant perpetual and universal peace on earth? Various causes, doubtless, operate to mislead us. Hereditary errors have fastened their influence upon us all. And wrong notions of honor and patriotism drive many to smother

their honest convictions. And the false glare which surrounds the exploits of the warrior blinds us, and the shout of the barbarous populace as they applaud the man whose hands are dyed with blood stuns us ; and so we become silent or careless — falling in with the general habit, for no better, and no other reason, than that it is the habit of the land. But there are two causes of our submission to the unchristian sentiment of our times, which demand particular notice. One is unbelief, the other is despair ; and if they be not sins of high indignity towards Heaven, they are faults of most disastrous influence upon human affairs.

First, men do not believe that Christianity prohibits and condemns war. They admit, that it is a peaceful religion, — a religion designed to bless mankind, to restrain human passions, to fill the breast with love, to change the face of the earth, to establish the reign of truth and justice, and inspire admiration of the gentler virtues which Heathenism despised ; but still it does not utter any prohibition against war ! It requires its disciples to love and serve one another, and yet permits them to fight ! It inculcates self-denial, and yet passes no sentence of condemnation on the most palpable and flagrant indulgence of selfishness ! It tells us to make Christ our example, yet says not a word in rebuke of a custom, with which we can no more associate the personal history of Jesus than we could connect his name with scenes of debauchery,

peculation, or fanatical violence ! The very thought of Jesus Christ as a commander of military forces is abhorrent to us. We shrink from it as from insult or blasphemy. And yet we refuse our assent to the statement, that Christianity pronounces war an offence against God and man. I say that we refuse our assent to this statement, because it is not to be presumed that men who honor and support Christian institutions — nay, who talk of the goodness of God in giving us the religion of Jesus — would practically defy their own belief, and trample upon their own solemn convictions. No ! It is want of faith, alone, that we need charge upon them. They do not believe that Christianity and war are contradictory terms, irreconcilable ideas. Remind them of the purpose and character of the Gospel ; speak to them of the philanthropy of our Lord ; quote his very words ; — you make no impression upon them. They do not believe in the inference which seems to you inevitable. They deny the justice of that inference. They hold that it is not unchristian to fight !

If we were not familiar with this disbelief of one of the plainest and one of the principal peculiarities of the religion of the New Testament, we should be astonished at it. It is not, however, difficult to discover the grounds on which it rests. It assumes, in the first place, that war is necessary, and then it concludes that Christianity cannot condemn war, because

Christianity would not involve itself in the absurdity of condemning what is inevitable. This, I have no doubt, is the process of reasoning to which a multitude of minds surrender themselves. ‘War is inseparable from the condition of man on earth; therefore whatever in the New Testament seems to be a prohibition of war, must be construed in some other than its obvious sense.’ But who gave these persons the right, or the ability, to pronounce war an inevitable part of the world’s experience through all ages? On what do they found their opinion of its necessary connexion with the progress of our race? On the history of the past? The past has shown what man must be without a revelation such as was brought by Christ, not what he may be under such a revelation. On the strength of passions which can never be eradicated from our nature? Christianity proposes, however, to regulate and sanctify them; and this alone is needed for the termination of whatever encouragement they might give to the trade of the warrior. On the conflict of interests, which must at longer or shorter intervals develop itself in the growth of nations? It is not the effect of Christianity alone, but of civilization and political science, to bring these interests into harmony; and first to approach, and then to proclaim the discovery, that the prosperity of each nation is promoted, rather than hindered, by the prosperity of all other nations. On the alleged advantage of removing by

the pestilence of war the accumulation of ignorance and sin and want, which in the course of a few years becomes more than society can bear? And this from the lips of persons, who believe that Jesus Christ came to raise the miserable and save the sinful, to prevent this very sacrifice of human beings on the altar of an impatient or desperate selfishness! Society can bear all that would be left for it to bear, if Christianity could have but a fair opportunity for working out its own results. War is not necessary for this reason, nor for any reason. As well might we say that murder and theft are necessary. They are only war on a small scale,—between individuals instead of nations; and may find as satisfactory justification. It is not bound to the progress of our race by ligaments that cannot be sundered. If it were, I would never again be guilty of the impious satire of calling God our Father.

This, however, is not the only ground on which the unbelief I have spoken of finds a false support. It resorts to the distinction between persons and communities, and while it interprets the Christian precepts rigidly in their application to individuals, perceives no relation which they have to that aggregation of individuals which constitutes a nation. And yet, in the name of truth and common sense, we ask, what plausible reason, or what shadow of a reason, is there for this confinement of the Christian principles to the

action of *one*, when the many are only the *ones* agreeing to act together? agreeing, and therefore responsible each for his participation in the act. An expounder of their duty to his fellow-men may almost be ashamed to spend time in proving, that the same obligations rest on men in a public or an associate capacity as in private life; for it is so manifestly true as to need no proof. A nation, as a moral whole, is only an abstraction. It can have no conscience of its own, separate from the consciences of them who compose the nation. And its abstract unity cannot release *their* consciences from the obligations of duty. They are held within the same restrictions, and commanded to practise the same virtues, in the service of their country as in their personal engagements. Dishonesty, injustice, revenge, are just the same vices in a nation as in an individual. They are the vices which several individuals agree to perpetrate or practise together, instead of each person's adopting them singly. That is the whole difference between public and private immorality; and it shows how small the difference between a nation's duty and the duty of an individual; and between the application of Christianity to national concerns and to private affairs. The same laws of attraction and motion, of restraining and disturbing forces, which affect a single star, control the systems into which they are combined. The counterpart of this is found in the political and moral relations of men.

I have said that the second great cause of the want of correspondence between our professions and our practice, so far as this subject is concerned, is despair. We despair of the removal of this tremendous evil from the world. We say, ‘The time can never come when it will cease. It always has existed, and it always will. If it be not a *necessary* attendant on the fortunes of humanity, the whole experience of the past authorises the assertion, that it will continue as long as the earth shall have inhabitants. Christianity has been in the world for nearly two thousand years, and it has not put an end to war. On the contrary, it has added new fuel to the flame which had so often wasted the fairest regions of Europe and Asia. The most licentious soldiery and the most unscrupulous Generals the world ever saw, have belonged to Christian lands. The direst inventions, which have reduced warfare from a scene around which might be thrown the romance of personal bravery, to a skilful use of science in the work of destruction, have been the fruits of Christian civilization. Christian eloquence has embalmed the memories of the battle-field, and Christian poetry wreathed the name of the bloody hero with imperishable associations, and Christian piety lent the sanctity of its prayers to the march of armies and the strife of hosts. How then can we hope for the extirpation of war? All we can do, is to mitigate its atrocities and elevate its uses.’ Alas!

this recital is all true — true to the letter. And a heavy weight of shame and condemnation does its truth impose on Christendom. But still we need not, should not, despair. As the former error which we considered was disbelief of the teaching of Christianity, this is disbelief of its moral power; and that is virtual infidelity. Whatever Christ taught is practicable. Whatever Christianity came to accomplish, it is capable of effecting. God has not sent an inefficient instrument to execute his purposes. To intimate that he has, would be to impugn his perfections. Neither will his “word return unto him void; but it shall accomplish that which he pleases, and shall prosper in the thing whereto he sent it.” If we believe in the Divine origin and Divine gift of Christianity, we are bound to believe in its spiritual efficacy, — an efficacy sufficient to displace all false opinions, and uproot from the soil of the world all pernicious customs. It is the arm of the Lord, which must be mightier than all the reasonings or prejudices, institutions or habits of men. It is the law of life, and they who would live must come under its authority. It is meant to produce an entire regeneration of society, and that will be witnessed only when the whole action of society shall express the spirit of love.

But besides these general considerations, there is enough in the recent history of the world to encourage hope and rebuke despair. It is but saying, I appre-

hend, what facts will justify, when we affirm that more has been gained for the cause of Peace within the last twenty-five years than for any five centuries between the conversion of Constantine and the commencement of this period. Something has been effected by discussion. Many have been led to see how opposite are the instructions of Christianity to the usages of war. Societies for the promotion of peace, which once excited only a smile of contempt, are now allowed to exert some influence on public opinion. Methods have been proposed and adopted — and successfully adopted — for settling national differences without a resort to arms. And, more than all, an unusually long continuance of peace has given the nations an opportunity, such as they have never before enjoyed, for learning how great are the advantages of Peace ; and not only has it formed a new class of habits to which the people of the different countries have now become accustomed, in place of the hostility and insecurity which marked the life they inherited from their ancestors, but a new generation has arisen, nursed in the arms of a pacific policy, and now arrived at an age when they will take the direction of affairs upon themselves. Here, certainly, are reasons for indulging the belief, that Christianity will have much less of opposition or hindrance to overcome in its future attempts to establish an unbroken and indissoluble peace, than it has encountered at any former period. There is

no need, therefore, of despair. It betrays an inattention to the facts which lie all about us, and it is equivalent to a denial of the divine character of our religion.

Notwithstanding, it is said that there is a prospect of war between this country and Great Britain. I cannot believe that the fears of those who anticipate such an event will be realized. Every consideration of reason, interest, and religion, is a security against it. If it should take place, it would convict two nations which claim to be the wisest on earth of the most extreme folly ; for whichever should prevail in the end, neither could gain as much as it would lose, and both would waste treasure and life, sacrifice essential interests, and embarrass all their internal as well as external relations for the sake of what neither needs, and both would be better without. I cannot suppose that we shall have a war with England, because I believe that they who have the conduct of affairs, in both countries, are too clear-sighted and too politic, if not too conscientious, to suffer such a calamity to befall them and the world. I cannot entertain the fear which some express, because I think the public sentiment both here and there is strong enough, and right enough, to prevent an issue which would show that we had neither profited by the lessons of experience, nor gained any just acquaintance with the precepts of the Gospel.

But we are told, that the people *are* eager for war, both here and in Great Britain, and that of the men who compose our national legislature the majority are ready to give effect to the public will. I do not as yet feel compelled to accept either of these statements, and I will not believe them till events lay on me the painful necessity. The bulk of the people in this country do not want a war. Go through the villages of New England, go among the farmers and mechanics of the Middle States, go even through the South and the West, and get at the real feeling of the men, and the women — and shall not they be considered, in a matter so deeply affecting their personal comfort and domestic joys? — and you will find the sentiment of the people decidedly and strongly against a war. And of the members of Congress is it to be believed, that the greater number are so infatuated, that they would plunge the country into all the miseries which must follow upon a rupture with England, for the sake of gratifying a vile appetite in the people — the appetite for blood, — even if it existed? War is not what any party, or any section of the country wants. At the North we should deprecate it, at the South they would dread it, at the West they may provoke, but they do not desire it; because North, South and West alike would suffer, and must see that they would suffer, immensely; and because this is not a merely political question — if it were, I should not touch it

here — but a great moral question, on which the voice of religion should be heard, and will be heard and be regarded.

But it is said, that the noisy and the rash, the injudicious and the passionate, the ambitious and the unprincipled will take upon themselves to represent the sentiment and control the action of the country, and they will hurry us into war. *This is the danger*; and therefore have I felt it to be a duty, that in the pulpit something should be spoken to arouse the people to such an expression of their desire for peace as shall prevent this misrepresentation of their feelings. Let them not, by their silence, or unconcern, or too great confidence in the prevalence of a sound policy, enable those who would be glad to exasperate a quarrel between this country and England for their own sinister purposes, to accomplish their object. Let the important political and economical considerations which bear upon this subject be presented in their proper force, that they may awaken and secure attention. Let the great Christian principles which are involved, be brought out and weighed. Let the pleas, on which they who advocate war rely for their justification, be examined, that their weakness may be made manifest.

These pleas are in substance but two, be the forms in which they are presented ever so various. One is the magical but mischievous cry, that the honor of the country is concerned. ‘The honor of the country’ — a

phrase on which the changes are rung by those whose only idea of honor is compounded of the insolence of the bully and the meanness of the miser. Is there no honor, but in clamoring or in fighting for one's rights? Is there no honor in generosity? nor in preferring the lessons of conscience to the impulses of passion? nor in maintaining the supremacy of moral principle and in paying reverence to Christian truth? Or, would that which is honorable in a private citizen bring dishonor on a people or its government? We had reason to hope, that our part at least of the Christian world had outgrown the notion, that honor must always be maintained at the cannon's mouth. Is that the highest form of national character, which is seen or vindicated on the field of battle? No! No! Let every house, and every heart in the land echo, No! England, be she chargeable with ambition and cupidity, can teach us better than that; for she has spoken, in some of her journals, of the honor that may be found in yielding rather than in enforcing even just claims. If we suffer her to go beyond us in the assertion or exemplification of the true honor of a country, we shall indeed be disgraced.

The other plea is one which too easily captivates American ears,—that we must extend the area of freedom over this continent. There are more replies to be given to this idle declamation than I have now time to repeat. It is sufficient to say, that we have some-

thing else to do besides extending the area of freedom ; and that is, to secure for freedom its true character within the bounds over which it is already extended. The first and great “ mission ” of this country is not to spread free institutions over all North America ; but to show the effect of free institutions on a people who know how to appreciate and use them. We have enough before us for at least a century to come, in making all within the settled limits of our territory free, and wisely free. We shall do more good by setting the example of a people who can exercise self-government without injustice to others or injury to themselves, than by extending the *name* of our institutions across the breadth or length of the continent. Free institutions are worth having, only when they give energy to a people’s virtue and freedom to their souls.

Be it then our business, friends and hearers, to expose the emptiness of these pleas, on which they who would embroil this country with a foreign Power rely for their justification. There is neither pertinency nor force in them. Say so. Encourage others to say so. Tell your countrymen what is the real honor of a nation, and what the true office of the American people. Express your distaste, your disapprobation, your abhorrence of war ; of war with England, or France, or Mexico, or any other country on earth ; of war, as in itself unchristian, fruitful of evil, productive

of no good. Say that war costs more than it yields; that if we could get the whole Pacific coast from southernmost California to the most northern of the Russian settlements by a single month's fighting, we should pay too much for it. Say that it is not all worth a drop of blood shed in the strife of rival nations. Say that peace is what Christ came to bestow on men, through their adoption of the principles of his religion; and that it is what you as his disciples will maintain, and the country must maintain, let some be ever so loud in their imputation of treachery or cowardice. Show you the courage of faith, and the patriotism of principle. Utter the language which I have now commended to your lips, in the public places or the private circles to which you may have access. Men! speak it to one another in the street, and let it be overheard by the passer-by. Wives! repeat it to your husbands in the thoughtful quietude of your homes. Mothers! explain it to your children. One and all, be ye open and earnest, firm though calm, in asserting the claims of Peace upon every American and every Christian.

Let no one say that this is unsuitable advice for the preacher to give on this day. The preaching, this day at least, has been according to my deepest convictions of duty. I have abstained from all allusions which might connect the subject with censure or commendation of any political party, and have looked

at it from the higher ground of Christian instruction. Complain not that the discourse has been long. I could not say what I wished to say in less space ; and say it, and say it now, I felt I must. And therefore once more I entreat you, friends and hearers, to prove yourselves the meek, but strong supporters of Peace. Let not the country be driven or be dragged into a war. Forestall such a conclusion by the thousand voices you shall lift up against it. Other voices will join with yours, and the sound of this protest against the abomination of war shall travel as on electric wires along the Atlantic shore ; and shall spread itself over the interior, till it has flowed down the western slopes of the Alleghanies and through the great valley of the Mississippi ; and thence, with the mighty force which it shall have accumulated, will it return and at the doors of Congress utter itself in such clear and commanding tones, that the legislators of the land, if they rejoice not when they hear it, shall be afraid not to obey its behest. And then, when one more crisis has been passed in safety, and another war averted, we shall have one more to add to our present array of proofs, that the time is coming, when “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more ;” for the Prince of Peace shall extend his gentle reign over the whole earth.